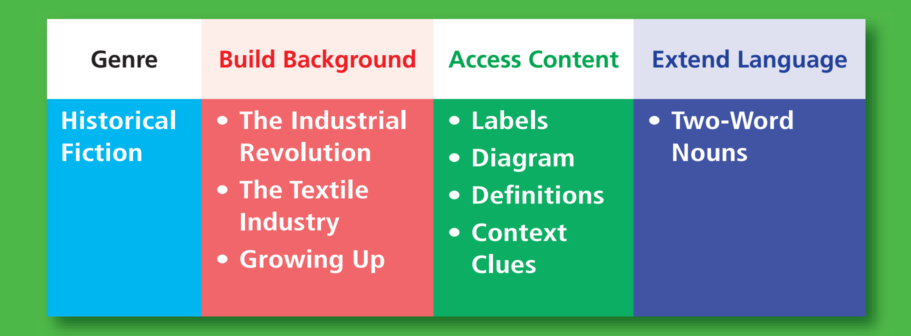
ELL Reader

Social Studies

Social Studies



Genre	Build Background	Access Content	Extend Language
Historical Fiction	• The Industrial Revolution • The Textile Industry • Growing Up	• Labels • Diagram • Definitions • Context Clues	• Two-Word Nouns

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A Mill Girl's Day

by Camilla Black

Illustrated by Marilynne K. Roach



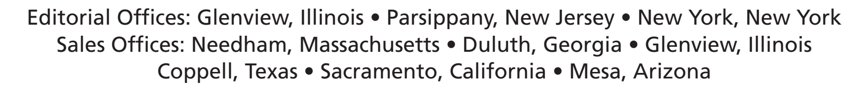


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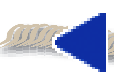
It is 4:30 A.M. The factory bell rings. Molly Farrell wakes up in her bedroom in the boarding house. Her three roommates do the same. They all need to be at the factory gate in half an hour.

Molly is smiling. Hattie is not. "Cheer up," says Molly. "Tomorrow is Saturday and payday!"

It is Friday, May 30, 1835. Tomorrow, the mill girls work only half a day: 8 hours. They earn about $2.50 per week, paid on the last day of the month.

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boarding house: house where people pay to live and eat




5:00 A.M.

By 5:00 A.M., hundreds of mill girls stream through the huge iron gate of the enormous cotton mill in Lowell, Massachusetts. The women range in age from 15 to 30, but they are all called mill girls.

Hattie will go to work in the spinning room. Molly will go to work in the weave room. Hattie's machine makes thread. Molly's loom weaves the thread into cloth.

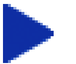
Molly waves to Hattie. "See you at breakfast!"

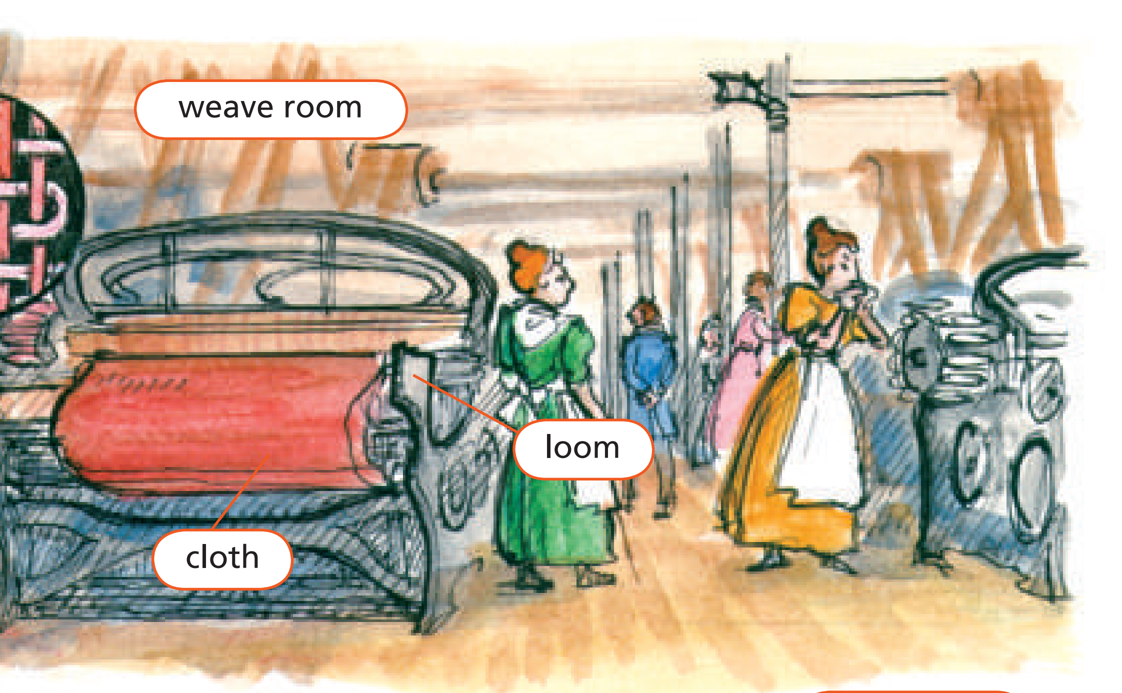


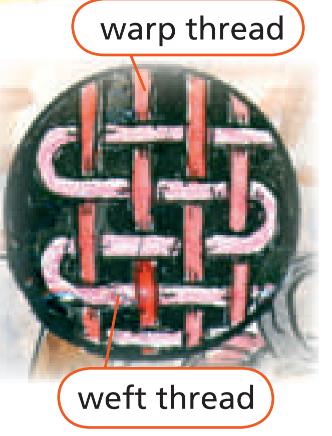
A spinning room

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cotton mill: place where cotton is made into cloth







The weave room is immense and filled with nearly 200 looms. The sound is deafening. Each girl tends two looms. Eliza tends the two looms on Molly's right. Eliza taught Molly how to work the looms when Molly first came to the mill. She was a kind teacher.

Molly watches as the shuttle speeds back and forth, carrying the weft thread and weaving it into the many warp threads. Molly sees that Eliza is coughing hard. With all the noise, though, she cannot hear her.

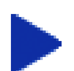
weft thread: thread that runs side-to-side (horizontally) in a loom

warp threads: threads that run up and down (vertically) in a loom



After two hours at the mill, the bell clangs again. It is time for breakfast. Molly hurries back to her boarding house. She eats with Hattie and the other girls in the dining room. It is good to get out of the hot and stuffy weave room.

The windows of the mill let in light, but they are always closed. Weave rooms have to be warm and damp. If they are not, the threads will dry out and break. Because the windows are closed, cotton dust floats in the air all the time. The mill girls breathe this dusty air.

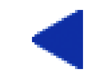



7:30 A.M.

12:00 noon

At 7:30 A.M., the girls hurry back to the mill. Molly listens to the roar of the machines every day, but the noise still surprises her. She smiles at Eliza as she begins work at her looms.

Suddenly, four warp threads break. Molly shuts off the loom and looks at it in dismay. She hates losing time. Her pay depends on how much cloth she weaves. Eliza looks to see if Molly needs help. "I can do it," Molly shouts. Working quickly, Molly ties the threads. Then she turns the machine back on.

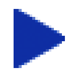


Dinner is served at noon. The girls get a whole hour for it. This is the big meal of the day. In the evening, supper will be smaller.

After dinner, Molly pays Mrs. Ellis $1.25 for her room and meals for the week. After paying, Molly has $1.25 left each week. This week, she decides, she will use 25 cents to buy a book and 30 cents to buy a hat! She'll spend 8 cents on a concert ticket and send the rest (62 cents) to her family.

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concert: music performance





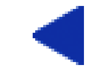
At 1:00 P.M., the machines begin again, but Eliza is not at her looms.

"Where's Eliza, Mr. Larson?" Molly asks her supervisor.

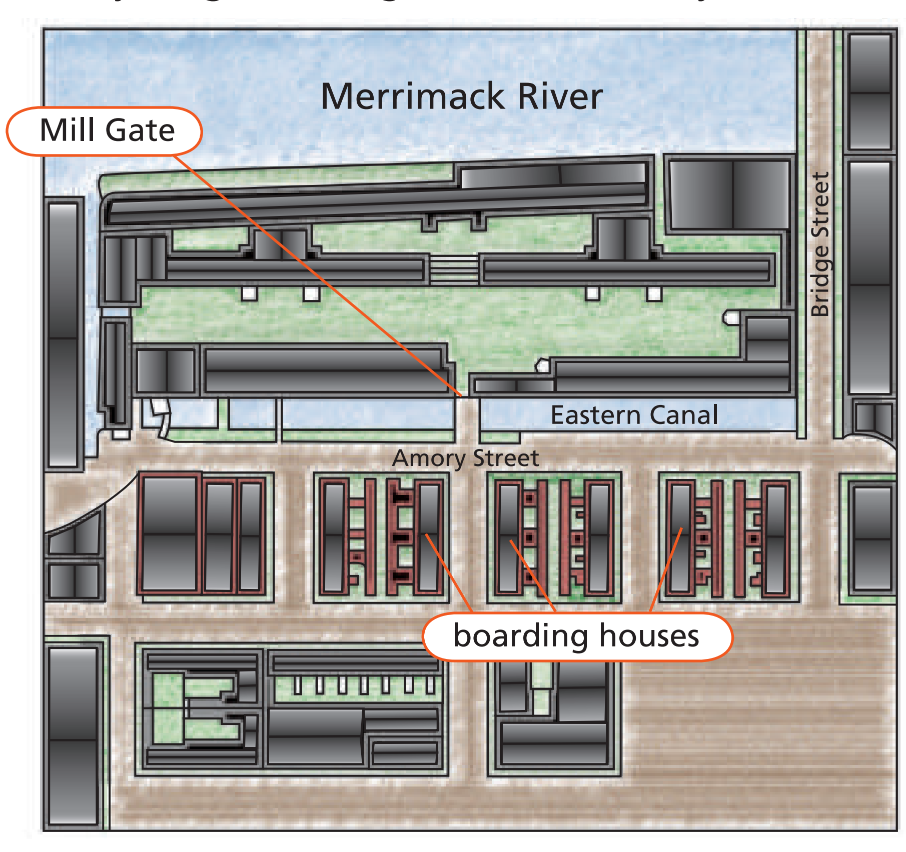
"She is ill," Mr. Larson replies. "Will you please work her two machines as well as your two?"

Molly feels awful. Eliza had worked at the mill for two years. She was like a big sister to Molly. Molly decides to visit her on Saturday.

supervisor: boss



The huge factory bell clangs again. It is the end of the workday. Workers stream out of the mill and across Amory Street. It is not far from the mill to the boarding houses. In fact, everything the mill girls need is nearby.



The girls eat supper together and then change their clothes. Molly and Hattie are on their way to a lecture. Every week there is a different speaker. Tonight, the girls will hear about life in the Wild West.

a lecture: a talk before an audience; a speech

Wild West: land in the American west before about 1920



Molly and Hattie hurry back to the boarding house after the lecture, which was interesting.

Curfew is at 10:00 P.M., Molly thinks. *I just have time to finish the letter to my family that I started last night, brush my teeth, and go to bed. Then tomorrow I will visit Eliza. If she is sick in bed, I will read to her. But now I must finish my letter.*

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curfew: the time that a person must be home for the night





This is the letter Molly writes.



Dear Ones,

I have been here in Lowell for three months. Sometimes I feel lonely and afraid. I miss you all so much! But I am learning a lot.

There are many rules at the mill and at the boarding house. The mill rules are hard sometimes. They do not ever open the windows, so the weave room is hot. Dust from the cotton floats in the air. Is that good for us? I don't know.

But there are exciting things to do in Lowell. Hattie and I go to the library and lectures once a week. Sometimes we even go to concerts.

Please use the money in this letter to help on the farm.

Your loving daughter,

Molly

P.S. My friend Eliza became ill this week. Please keep her in your thoughts.





Tomorrow is Saturday, so Molly has to work for only eight hours. After work, she will have time to go shopping and visit Eliza. She plans to buy a book about the Wild West and read it to her friend.

As Molly falls asleep, the sound of the looms still rings in her ears. Tonight, her dreams will take her far away from the cotton mills—back to her family's farm or forward to the wild, wild west. Sweet dreams, Molly.



Talk About It

1. Was working in the mills hard? Why or why not?
2. A responsible person thinks clearly, works hard, and can be trusted. Is Molly a responsible girl? Do you think she will visit Eliza?

Write About It

3. A fact can be proven or checked in a book. An opinion is what someone thinks or believes. Make a chart on a separate sheet of paper, and provide story facts to support these two opinions in Molly's letter.

The mill rules are hard sometimes.	There are exciting things to do in Lowell.

Extend Language

Sometimes two words together can name one thing. A *factory bell* rings at a factory. A *mill girl* worked in a mill. What is a *school book*? Where does a *supermarket baker* work?

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